

Il Miglior Fabbro?

On Gordon Lish's Editing of Raymond Carver's
What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

Enrico Monti, University of Bologna, Italy

1. Introduction

In April 1981, when *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* appeared, Raymond Carver was still little known to wider audiences and few could predict that he was soon to be acclaimed as the “American Chekhov” and the father of literary Minimalism. Yet, those seventeen short fragments managed to reinvigorate the realistic trend of the short-story with their spare and laconic portrait of small-town America: a portrait free of condescendence, irony, or denunciation, yet full of hopeless desolation. That collection's pared-down narrative has come to represent for many readers Raymond Carver's stylistic trademark, although it undeniably marks a “minimalistic” peak in his career, and a point of no return.¹ It is precisely in relation to that minimalism that we shall reconsider the role played in the collection's final output by Gordon Lish, Carver's longtime editor and friend. To do so, we shall analyze the scope and the extent of Lish's editorial work on the collection, as it is now visible in the archives of the Lilly Library at Indiana University.²

2. Lish and Carver

A flamboyant fiction editor at *Esquire* (1969-76), McGraw-Hill (1976-1977) and Knopf (1977-1990) and a writer himself, Gordon Lish acquired a reputation in the 70s as a provocative, brilliant talent scout, “at the epicenter of American literary publishing” (Birkerts 252). He and

Carver had been friends since the mid-60s, and he was Carver's best advocate once he became a fiction editor at the magazine *Esquire*.³ Rumors about his role in shaping Carver's early stories started circulating in the 80s, although neither Carver nor Lish publicly addressed the matter. It was only in the early 90s, when Lish sold his personal papers to the Lilly Library, that scholars got a clear sense of his impact on those stories. The debate received an international echo⁴ in the wake of a *New York Times Magazine* article that appeared in 1998, in which D.T. Max revealed the results of his research on the Lish archives.⁵ Ever since, the Carver-Lish relationship entered the sphere of the most controversial editorial relationships, alongside the famed Eliot-Pound collaboration over *The Waste Land*, or Hemingway-Fitzgerald over *The Sun Also Rises*, or again Maxwell Perkins-Thomas Wolfe on *Look Homeward, Angel*, only to name the most renowned (and documented) cases in contemporary American literature.⁶

Among the Lish folders at the Lilly Library, one can find the original proofs of several of Carver's stories, namely the two Knopf collections that made him famous (*What We Talk* and *Cathedral*), complete with Lish's editing, as well as Carver's letters to Lish during their collaboration. Examining those archives, one may reconstruct a complex editorial relationship and reconsider the transformations that Carver's prose seemed to undergo in his later collections, starting from *Cathedral* (1983), on to *Fires* (1983-1984) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). In particular, one is led to reconsider Carver's decision to publish "extended" versions of some early stories in those later collections, a decision which Carver and most critics explained in terms of reprise and expansion of a narrative felt too pared-down, and not as the retrieval of previous, longer versions of the stories (Gentry and Stull 125, 229-30).

Going through the manuscripts of *What We Talk*, one is immediately struck by the extent to which Lish's editing contributed to "minimalize" the collection. Operating at different levels

(syntax, lexicon, and plot), Lish emphasized several aesthetical features of literary minimalism, defined by Kim Herzinger in terms of “equanimity of surface, ‘ordinary’ subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don’t think out loud” (7) and “spareness and cleanness” (14); or again as “terse, oblique, realistic, or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction,” in the words of John Barth (1). In particular, Lish heightened the peculiar sense of bleakness which pervades Carver’s stories and which he admittedly perceived as Carver’s main strength: “Carver’s way of staging a story, staging its revelation, is, I think, unique. Carver’s sentence is unique, but what has most powerfully persuaded me of Carver’s value is his sense of a peculiar bleakness” (Gentry and Stull 84). Having identified the force of Carver’s prose, Lish moved on to sharpen it, editing those stories (at least) twice,⁷ rewriting titles and endings, and cutting out several pages of the original versions, thus pushing his vision of the now well-known “less is more” aesthetic to its limits. In this sense, his editorial work turned out to be essentially a subtractive operation, aimed at expelling any sentimentalism and bringing Carver’s spare prose to its extremes.

3. The Editing at Close Range

We shall start our analysis with a few words about the complex genealogy of *What We Talk*. Out of the seventeen stories composing the collection, five had appeared, in a different form, in a small-press collection that Carver had put together, independently from Lish in 1977, entitled *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*.⁸ Those stories are a precious touchstone, for they are often fairly similar, if not virtually identical, to the typescript versions edited by Lish and now archived at the Lilly Library. Among the remaining stories, one had appeared in a magazine

years before (“Friendship” [1971], later “Tell the Women We’re Going”), but the bulk of the collection had been written between 1977 and 1980.

After Lish’s editing, four of those stories were to be restored by Carver in their unabridged form in later publications.⁹ Odd as it may sound, two of those stories (“The Bath” and “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit”) circulated in two fairly different versions at roughly the same time, for they had been accepted for publication in magazines before Lish’s extensive editing.¹⁰ Just to get a sense of the editorial intricacies behind *What We Talk*, one may consider that only two of the seventeen stories appeared exclusively in this collection, while a story like “So Much Water So Close to Home” can count as four different publications in collections (1977, 1981, 1983-1984, 1988)¹¹ and “Popular Mechanics” can count as three, with different titles: in order, “Mine,” “Popular Mechanics,” and “Little Things,” although the three versions of the story are fairly similar to one another, and the latter two are actually the same story.

While Carver’s penchant for revision may somewhat explain this textual restlessness on his part, there is no doubt that *What We Talk*’s controversial editing added to his urgency in revising some of the stories after their publication.

3.1. Titles

As these preliminary considerations suggest, *What We Talk* has quite a complicated publishing history, and we shall now see in detail the role Gordon Lish played in all of this. Our point of departure shall be the new titles which Lish gave to more than half of the stories of *What We Talk*. His new titles are generally more oblique or allusive, and they foreground a sentence or an object of the story. A striking (and brilliant) example of this technique is the title “Sacks” given to “The Fling,” a story of a father’s fling told to his own son, who narrates the story. The

new title cleverly enlarges a plain, incidental element of the story—a sack of gifts that the narrator received from his father and eventually forgot at the airport after their talk—and invests it with a deeply symbolic power (beside introducing a hardly coincidental homophony with “sex”).

Plain one-word titles (such as “Beginners” and “Friendship,” or the conventional “Dummy,” after the story’s main character) were replaced by such long and intriguing titles as “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” “Tell the Women We’re Going,” and “The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off.” In all these cases, the new titles echo a sentence of the story and appear more captivating and stylized than the earlier ones. “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” (for “Where is Everyone?”) goes in the same direction, while introducing an almost ironic tone which is absent in the earlier version of the story (as well as in most Carver’s stories). The new title appears to be in line with the different characterization given to the narrator in the final version of the story, a characterization which denies the sense of solitude emerging so clearly in Carver’s earlier (and later) version, and evident in its initial title.¹² Incidentally, one may also note how two of the three titles in the interrogative form (“Where Is Everyone?” and “Want to See Something?”) were changed by Lish, which may be seen as symbolic of his intention to reduce the explorative, introspective dimensions of the stories. Indeed, in both edited stories, the narrators appear colder and more detached from the facts they are narrating, and they barely ask any questions at all.

In several cases, the decision to re-title the stories goes along with Lish’s editing process, to the point that sometimes a new title becomes only necessary after the changes he made to the story. A striking example is the story “Friendship,” a peculiar one among Carver’s works for its sheer (and well-detailed) outburst of violence. Its initial title offered a clear interpretative clue

into the significance of the story: however peculiar, given the violent event into which the two friends were joined, it was a story of friendship. Not only was that title too benevolent, but it was truly unfit for the edited story in *What We Talk*. In fact, Lish had traded its final act of friendship (the hug between the two friends after the tragedy) for one of his most lapidary endings, in which all the untold violence is suddenly condensed in the unsettling image of the rock used in the killing.

In the end, one cannot help admiring the strength of some of the new titles, most notably that of “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” which, significantly, became the title for the collection. It is true that Carver did object to some of the new titles, and indeed restored a few of his initial ones in the following collections (or further changed them, as for the above-mentioned “Popular Mechanics”).¹³ It may be argued that titles are tightly connected to “marketing” considerations and, as such, are more liable to be changed in the editorial process—although this appears to be more the case with the collection title, rather than with those of the single stories. In this case though, the new titles appear to reflect a wider editorial scheme, as we shall see more in details.

3.2. Cuts

As anticipated, Lish’s editing is first and foremost a subtractive operation and indeed his extensive cuts are the first things one notices while leafing through the manuscripts at the Lilly Library. Lish’s imposing black marker literally crossed out several pages of the manuscripts, eventually managing to condense 17 stories in the 150 pages of *What We Talk*. “Beginners” and “Friendship” lost respectively 12 pages (out of 33) and 18 pages (out of 37) in the editing process; “A Small, Good Thing” (restored in *Cathedral*) was reduced to a third of its original

length to become “The Bath;” and “Where is Everyone?” (restored in *Fires*) lost more than half of its 15 pages to become “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit.” While not all of the stories underwent such “amputation,” it is true that most of them lost significant parts in the editing process, and quite often they were heavily truncated toward the end (see § 3.5). In particular, Lish chose to remove many descriptive passages providing a more detailed scenario for the stories, most traces of psychological introspection, as well as several stories within the stories. This is evident in his crossing out a number of positive, encouraging episodes, which counterbalanced the bleakness of the facts narrated. As D.T. Max aptly put it, Lish was “constantly on guard against what he saw as Carver’s creeping sentimentality” and indeed expunged most if not all concessions to sentimentality, so as to avoid diverting attention from that core of “peculiar bleakness” (35).

A case in point is the long digression on the Gateses, the elderly couple who miraculously survived a serious car accident in “Beginners” (later “What We Talk”). Their story is brought up by Mel McGinnis as an exemplum of “what real love is,” something which, in his words, “ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we’re talking about when we talk about love” (*What* 144, 146). However, the story of their recovering is substantially reduced in the published version, and deprived of its “happy ending,” fading away almost unnoticed on the wake of their progressive drunkenness. This same intent can be found in Lish’s significant editing of another sample of “real love” in the story “Gazebo”: it is once again the case of an old, loving couple, and Carver’s initial version devoted several more paragraphs to celebrating their persistent love.

A similar “extrospective” intention can be found in Lish’s extensive editing of “Want to See Something?”—a story which was also cut almost by half and re-titled “I Could See the Smallest Things” in *What We Talk*. In this story of familiar dramas converging into a nocturnal

encounter between two neighbors, Nancy and Sam, Lish crossed out a full page in which Carver offered some backgrounds on their troubled state. In the final version, the reader is left with fewer clues about the causes of Sam's insomnia and his tragicomic, nocturnal hunt for slugs: only a hint of the death of his first wife remains, but nothing about his daughter's leaving him, nor about his albino son, nor Nancy's horror in seeing the baby, nor again Sam's cries in the middle of the night. Dramas are rarely given voice in *What We Talk*, and the conversation between Nancy and Sam remains grounded on the silences of what is left unsaid, incapable of overcome the two fences separating their neighboring houses and lives. Like elsewhere, Lish's editing took the "famed" strategy of omission to its extremes, leaving almost everything implicit, most notably Nancy's liberating words to her own husband at the end of the "fuller" story. With what can be seen as a typical Lish's touch, those words were replaced by an ironic parallel between her sleeping husband and Sam's slugs.¹⁴

As a final sample of psychological introspection erased by Lish, we can take this passage from an "extended" version of "The Bath" (which appeared in the literary magazine *Columbia* in 1981)—a passage which was crossed out in *What We Talk*, only to be restored, in a slightly different form, in Carver's later collections.

While the baker was bent over the counter with the pencil in his hand, the woman studied the man's coarse features and wondered if he'd ever been anything but a baker. Had he been a father, perhaps? Did he know about birthday cakes and parties only insofar as he was a baker? (32)

In Lish's choice to expel this paragraph, one cannot help noticing the characters' refusal to "think out loud" identified by Herzinger as one of the key features of literary minimalism. Interestingly enough, the paragraph (devoid of this passage) closes on what seems a declaration of intent:

“This was all the baker was willing to say. No pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that was not necessary” (*What* 48). In Lish’s editing, all that was not strictly necessary was to be left out, and in a few cases, one has the impression that some of what may have been necessary followed as well.

3.3. Syntactical Changes

At the syntactic level, Lish’s editing accentuated fragmentation in various ways. The breadth of some narrative passages in the original stories became a syncopated and fragmented rhythm in the published collection. Lish enhanced Carver’s use of parataxis by reducing sentences to minimal units, at times simple nominal constructions. The increased punctuation, together with other similarly “fragmentational” typographical devices, such as the insertion of blank lines to create small sections within the stories, led to the disintegration of all narrative blocks of any considerable length.

This different typographic impact can be appreciated comparing *What We Talk* with the manuscripts held at the Lilly Library, or again with the stories of *Furious Seasons* (1977). In fact, five stories from that small-press collection were recovered and re-edited for *What We Talk*, and the versions on which Lish performed his editing are altogether similar to those published in 1977.¹⁵ One has only to leaf through the two published collections to get a wholly different textual feeling: so dense and compact is the first, so spare and rarified the second, with short paragraphs separated by blank spaces and words hardly capable of filling the whiteness of the page.¹⁶ A similar feeling can be found in the final outline of “I Could See the Smallest Things” (published earlier as “Want to See Something?”).

[...] Everything lay in moonlight, and I could see the smallest things.

The clothespins on the line, for instance.

I put my hands on the glass to block out the moon. I looked some more. I listened. Then I went back to bed.

But I couldn't get to sleep. I kept turning over. I thought about the gate standing open. It was like a dare.

Cliff's breathing was awful to listen to. His mouth gaped open and his arms hugged his pale chest. He was taking up his side of the bed and most of mine.

I pushed and pushed on him. But he just groaned.

I stayed still awhile longer until I decided it was no use.

(What We Talk 31-32)

While this passage does not show any particular editing at the lexical level (except for a couple of minor changes), it was initially made of one single paragraph. By dividing it into six short paragraphs, Lish enhanced its syncopated rhythm, exploiting Carver's tight sequence of very short and simple sentences.

As a final example of this general penchant for fragmentation in Lish's editing, we can compare a short passage from "Where Is Everyone?" (restored in *Fires*) with its concise version in *What We Talk*, "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit."

The last time he'd been jailed, a month before that Sunday, I found out from my daughter that her mother had gone bail for him. Daughter Kate, who was fifteen, didn't take to this any better than I did. It wasn't that she had any loyalty to me in this—she had no loyalties to me or her mother in

anything and was only too willing to sell either one of us down the river.

(“Where Is Everyone?” *Fires* 174)

His own wife jailed him once. The second one did. I found out from my daughter that my wife went bail. My daughter Melody didn’t like it any better than I did. About the bail. It wasn’t that Melody was looking out for me. She wasn’t looking out for either one of us, her mother or me neither.

(“Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” *What We Talk* 18)

It is evident that its increased punctuation and shorter sentences gave the edited version a much tighter, brisker rhythm. Also, the repetition/clarification of concepts like “The second one did” or “About the bail” added a more colloquial touch to the narration, while emphasizing the indecisions and inarticulateness typical of drunken discourse. And this leads us directly to another distinctive feature of Lish’s editing, which becomes apparent at the lexical level.

3.4. Lexical Changes

On the whole, Lish’s lexical changes are directed at simplifying Carver’s language and enhancing its colloquiality. Lish introduced several colloquial expressions in the stories, which lowered the register of the narration. At the same time, he increased the use of indefinites (terms such as “thing,” “something,” etc.), somehow enforcing that “permanent recycling of words that generates semantic abrasion” (Chénétier 174-75). Examples include terms such as “booze” and “folks” replacing the more conventional “drinking” or “people,” or again the indefinite “thing” replacing several more detailed nouns, ranging from “affair” to “accident” to “woman.”¹⁷

Similarly, more specific or formal verbs were replaced by their generic, colloquial counterparts

(e.g., “to comment” and “to attend” became “to say things” and “to have been to”); various curses and imprecations were introduced (especially in “Gazebo” and “What We Talk”) and several “sophisticated” references were expelled (such as one to *Ivanhoe* in the title story, or to the scene of the dying father in Italo Svevo’s novel *Zeno’s Conscience* in “Where Is Everyone?”, or again to the proper names of Buzz Aldren [sic] and Neil Armstrong, dubbed as “the astronauts” in that same story [*Fires* 175, 179, *What* 20]).

The lowering or “impoverishment” of Carver’s lexicon often resulted in a more bragging voice, especially in the case of male characters and narrators (notably in “What We Talk,” “Gazebo,” and “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit”). Their discourse became looser, more violent, macho, and excessive, as well as increasingly detached from their narrative matter. An example can be found in the way Mel McGinnis (in the edited title story) cynically recalls the tragic accident in which the above-mentioned Gateses were involved:

[...] There’d been this thing out on the interstate. Drunk kid, teenager, plowed his dad’s pickup into this camper with this old couple in it. They were up in their mid-seventies, that couple. The kid—eighteen, nineteen, something—he was DOA. Taken the steering wheel through his sternum.

(*What We Talk* 146)

The tone of this passage lost all its initial compassion to resemble the cold report of a tired and cynical doctor. Lish decisively contributed to it by eliminating conjunctions and the subject itself in the last sentence, as well as by inserting several deictics. This latter feature is quite frequent in his editing, for instance in expressions such as “this Ross guy” or “there was this funny thing of anything could happen” (*What* 18, 27). As Toolan rightly suggested in his stylistic analysis of

“Cathedral,” deictics can produce a “reverse-deictic effect” (130), in that, while pretending proximity with the indicated object/person, they may, in some contexts, mark a sense of detachment from them. A similar effect is pursued through another recurrent deictic structure in Lish’s editing, “there is/are.” A striking example can be found in this excerpt from the published version of “Gazebo,” where Lish introduced as many as five such structures in rapid sequence (only one “there was” was present in the first version of the story).

[...] I tell you, *there were* complaints, and sometimes *there were* words. Folks would load up and go somewhere else.

The next thing, *there’s* a letter from the motel management people.
Then *there’s* another, certified.

There’s telephone calls. *There’s* someone coming down from the city.

(*What We Talk* 26-27, emphasis mine)

One final significant intervention can be noted at the level of dialogue, where Lish added several of those “I said,” “s/he said” which eventually became a trademark of Carver’s style. This is true of most stories, but it is especially visible in “Tell the Women We’re Going” (earlier “Friendship”) and “One More Thing.” While already present in Carver’s earlier stories, this feature was undeniably heightened in Lish’s editing, as we can perceive from this short, emblematic passage, as it first appeared in “Friendship” in 1971, and then in its edited version in *What We Talk*.

“Where you going?”

The girls didn’t answer. The little one tittered. They kept riding and
Jerry drove along slowly beside them.

“Oh come on now. Where you going?”

“No place,” the little one answered.

“Where’s no place?”

“Just no place.”

“I told you my name. What’s yours? This is Jerry.”

(“Friendship” 66)¹⁸

“Where are you going?” Bill said.

The girls didn’t answer. The little one laughed. They kept bicycling and Jerry kept driving.

“Oh, come on now. Where you going?” Bill said.

“No place,” the little one said.

“Where’s no place?” Bill said.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” the little one said.

“I told you my name,” Bill said. “What’s yours? My friend’s Jerry,” Bill said.

(“Tell the Women We’re Going” *What We Talk* 62-63)

Comparing the two versions, one is immediately struck by the frequent use of “said” introduced by Lish (literally one every sentence), which gave the dialogue a syncopated, almost hypnotic rhythm. Repetition is undoubtedly a trademark of the minimalist aesthetics and one of Lish’s preferred rhetorical devices, as it emerges in several occasions throughout his editing (in the passage above, one may note as well the repetition of “the little one” and “kept”). In particular,

repetition seems to be privileged for its capacity to alienate the reader and enhance the sparseness of the narrative.

On the whole, Lish's lexical choices are meant to deepen the sense of desolation of the stories and to reduce the compassion in the narrators' voices. It is worth noting that several lexical changes occurred in Lish's second editing, the one to which Carver objected the most.¹⁹ One could argue that, upon completing a first reading and (lighter) editing, Lish came to develop a precise idea of the overall project of the collection and proceeded with his second editing accordingly, turning the single "episodes" into a deadpan, homogenous whole. In so doing, he contributed in a way to create that "cumulative effect" which readers and critics alike found to be one of the most compelling features of the collection—as opposed to Carver's first collection, which struck critics such as Nessel as "hardly uniform in subject or voice" (9).

3.5. Endings

To conclude our analysis, we shall spend a few words on the story endings, which reveal a major influence on the part of Lish, for he rewrote (or reshaped) at least nine of them. In line with his search for minimalistic effects, the new endings are usually epigraphic and laconic. They truncate the stories in the middle of their course, abandoning the reader with little clues and no consolation. We have already mentioned the case of "Tell the Women We're Going" (§ 3.1), but the story "One More Thing" is certainly emblematic of this intent, and all the more so given its symbolic position at the end of the collection:²⁰

He said, "I just want to say one more thing".

But then he could not think what it could possibly be.

(*What We Talk* 159)

What follows in Carver's typescript version is L.D.'s earnest declaration of love, regardless of what will happen between him and his wife (and his daughter).²¹ Needless to say, the story gets a whole different feeling as a consequence of this omission, which reinforces the characters' inability to articulate their feelings, abandoning the reader amidst despair and squalor. The characters' inarticulateness is a feature of Carver's stories that Lish resolutely enhanced in his editing, eventually making those people more speechless than they already were (as we showed in the case of "I Could See the Smallest Things," § 3.2). In the end, they appear not only unable, but also unwilling to make any effort toward comprehension, almost too tired to think and certainly too tired to look into themselves.

A similar intent can be found at the end of "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," and the result is just as abrupt, and possibly eerier, even "baffling" in Meyer's words (248). The new ending manipulates a sentence of the narrator's mother and puts it, colder than ever, in his wife's mouth.

"Honey," I said to Myrna the night she came home. "Let's hug awhile and then you fix us a real nice supper."

Myrna said, "Wash your hands."

(*What We Talk* 20)

In other cases, the new endings adopt a recurring foregrounding technique (similar in a way to that employed for some titles), in which an incidental object of the story is recalled and invested with an unprecedented iconic value.²² This is notably the case of the ashtray episode at the end of "A Serious Talk," which struck Carver himself as a master touch, an example of Lish's editing at its best.²³ Elsewhere though, this search for startling effects seems to accommodate more Lish's personal taste for provocation and "avant-gardism" than that accuracy of statement that Carver set, after Pound, as "the one sole morality of his writing" (Phillips 7). At times, the new endings

appear in fact almost perfunctory and not quite motivated in their puzzling ambiguity: almost one of those “tricks” which Carver openly rejected in his “On Writing” (*Fires* 23).²⁴

4. *Il Miglior Fabbro?*

Several critics explained the stylistic transformation that Carver’s stories seem to undergo since *Cathedral* (1983) in terms of a recovered peace of mind and personal serendipity. Even if one were to endorse such a strict relationship between life and writing—which, however simplistic, may retain some validity—one should consider that most *What We Talk* stories were in fact the result of that period of recovered serenity.²⁵ Carver felt those stories intimately connected to a new and fragile personal equilibrium, which may have found a way into the note of hope and optimism emerging from his earlier versions (as well as from his later publications). In this sense, one may argue that Lish (and his manifest aversion to any sentimentalism) contributed to freezing Carver’s “shift” toward what Stull defined as “humanist realism” (6).

As we tried to show in our analysis, Lish’s extensive editing on *What We Talk* cut conversations, introspections, side stories; enclosed Carver’s characters in painful silences, devoid of answers, devoid even of questions; and, finally, abandoned them with little consolation left (and no tears, nor shoulders to lean on). Ultimately, Lish showed much less sympathy than Carver for those characters and for their dramas, which in *What We Talk* are left not only unsolved, but mostly unspoken. Lish deliberately set out to dehumanize the stories and decontextualize them by expelling geographical coordinates, reducing scenarios to their basics, and omitting names and the few references to renowned people—as if to make the stories *topoi* of a modern, hopeless life.

Was Lish Carver's *miglior fabbro*? All things considered, Lish's editorial strategy comes across as a mix of sheer perception of Carver's talent and crafty understanding of what groundbreaking, innovative fiction should be at that time. Lish was undeniably a major (and mostly beneficial) influence in Carver's writing, as Carver publicly acknowledged in "Fires" and in various interviews. And indeed his influence on Carver's prose, through fifteen years of exchanging and editing manuscripts, may well go beyond the traces that are left for us to examine and speculate on. What seems to be at stake in *What We Talk* is their collaborative relationship, for up to that point Carver's reaction to Lish's editing had always been submissive and appreciative. With *What We Talk* though, things appear to have changed quite drastically: Lish's editing became more aggressive than ever²⁶ and Carver's position more assertive as he became less willing to accept such imposing editorial emendation. Carver's dissatisfaction is apparent in his decision to restore the longer versions of some stories shortly after *What We Talk*,²⁷ but also in his claiming better control over his future works, as demonstrated by the virtually untouched manuscripts of *Cathedral* (also held among the Lish papers in the Lilly Library). Needless to say, such a "conditional" collaboration was to be his last collaboration ever with Lish.

Rereading the "fuller" versions of the stories, one discovers a narrative breadth which is undoubtedly missing in the pared-down versions of *What We Talk*, as well as that respectful sympathy for his characters and their stories, which appear to be Carver's true trademarks throughout. As it was published, *What We Talk* shows Carver's talent acutely sharpened into a cohesive collection of deadpan, unsettling stories, capable of shocking the reader with the threatening power of their crafty omissions.²⁸ As such, the collection marks a point of no return in Carver's work and a dead-end point in many respects, for his style appears to be exploited to its limits (and possibly beyond them). While Lish's editing, at its best, succeeds in giving

Carver's prose a deeper intensity, in its most aggressive form it comes across as a challenge on the verge of excess, and the risk of slipping into a pretentious, tiresome provocation is sometimes palpable.

Notes

¹ The non-linear evolution of Carver's career has been stressed by several critics. In particular, Adam Meyer tried to account for the "oddity" of *What We Talk* among Carver's works, proposing an "hourglass" model, in which this collection represented its narrowing middle part (239).

² I would like to thank the librarians and archivists at the Lilly Library of the Indiana University at Bloomington for their kind assistance during my research period there, as well as professors Valentina Poggi and Franco Minganti for their precious help in directing my work.

³ A role which Carver never failed to acknowledge, defining him one of the major influences on his career, in his essay "Fires", as well as in several interviews (Gentry and Stull 60, 181-82, 234-35).

⁴ In Italy for instance, the novelist Alessandro Baricco wrote an article titled "L'uomo che riscriveva Carver" (The man who used to rewrite Carver) for the national newspaper *La Repubblica* (27 Apr. 1999), discussing the extent of Lish's editing and his own reading of the manuscripts.

⁵ Rumors had been circulating for several years before then, and had found one of the first public "recognitions" in a 1991 interview with William Kittredge (collected by Sam Halpert), where he revealed that one of Carver's most famous "extended" story, "A Small, Good Thing", was in fact a "restored" earlier version (Halpert 152). Professor Brian Evenson was one of the pioneer scholars to research the manuscripts, although he never published the results of his research. At the time of the final revision of this essay, a *New York Times* article raised new interest on the matter, hinting at the possibility of the unabridged stories being published in the next few years (cfr. *New York Times* 17 Oct 2007).

⁶ Eliot acknowledged Pound's decisive editorial work by dedicating *The Waste Land* "To Ezra Pound: Il miglior fabbro" (The greater craftsman), an expression taken from Dante's *Purgatorio*. All these cases are much more documented, and annotated versions of the initial drafts were published for *The Waste Land* and Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* (titled *O Lost*).

⁷ Two subsequent rounds of editing are visible in the manuscripts held at the Lilly Library and the second one was carried out on a retyped version of Carver's stories, which had incorporated Lish's first editing. However, the Carver-Lish correspondence suggests that some of the stories had already been read and edited earlier.

⁸ The stories are "Dummy" (later "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off"), "Distance" (later "Everything Stuck to Him" [1981] and "Distance" [1988]), "So Much Water So Close to Home", "The Fling" (later "Sacks"), "Mine" (later "Popular Mechanics" [1981] and "Little Things" [1988]). However, the Random-Vintage edition of *What We Talk* acknowledges only 3, omitting both "The Fling" and "Mine".

⁹ Namely "Where Is Everyone?" ("Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" in *What We Talk*) appeared in *Fires*; "A Small, Good Thing" ("The Bath" in *What We Talk*) appeared in *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From*; "If It Please You" ("After the Denim" in *What We Talk*) appeared as a chapbook for John Lord Press in 1984; "So Much Water So Close to Home" appeared in *Fires* and *Where I'm Calling From*.

¹⁰ "The Bath" appeared in the literary magazine *Columbia* in 1980 in a "fuller" version than the one in *What We Talk*, closer in a sense to "A Small, Good Thing", although not quite the same story (see Hashimoto 1995 for an in-depth analysis of this case). Similarly, "Where Is Everyone?" appeared in *TriQuarterly* in its longer version (later collected in *Fires*), just a few months before its "abridged" version in *What We Talk*.

¹¹ Actually a fifth one appeared in the anthology *The Pushcart Prize* in 1976, before being collected in *Furious Seasons and Other Stories* (1977). Nevertheless, among these 5 publications, two main versions can be identified, from which the remaining ones differ only for minor changes and copy-editing. For a detailed, comparative analysis of the development of the story, see Leypoldt 2002.

¹² Scott objects quite strongly to the short version of the story, denouncing what he perceives as "sitcom gags": "The people in 'Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit' are jerked around like puppets, without intelligible motive or meaningful engagement with each other" (58).

¹³ Cfr. Letter to Lish 7/8/1980, *Lish Mss.*

¹⁴ Despite the fact that Nancy's words are spoken to her sleeping husband, they have the same redeeming force of L.D.'s "one more thing" at the end of the homonymous story—a passage also edited out by Lish, as we shall see in § 3.5 (and both passages can be found in Stull and Carroll 2007).

¹⁵ It is in a way the same operation he did with *Fires*, after the publication of *What We Talk*. Both *Furious Seasons* and *Fires* were published by the small Capra Press and are now out of print. However, *Fires* was reissued by Random-Vintage a year later, in 1984, and it is still available in that form.

¹⁶ Significantly, Trussler points out how Carver's public reading of his stories "ignored these textual spaces, preferring instead to read the text as if it were one uninterrupted narrative" (31).

¹⁷ This latter instance can be found in "Gazebo", where the narrator Duane refers to the Mexican maid he had an affair with as a "neat, little thing" (*What* 23).

¹⁸ Except for a light copyediting, this story is altogether similar to the one submitted to Lish's attention in 1980. The only significant difference is in the ending, which was expanded by Carver after its publication in *Sou'wester* in 1971 and appears more complex and richer in the Lish Mss—only to be cut out completely.

¹⁹ Cfr. Letter to Lish 7/8/1980, *Lish Mss*. As mentioned, Lish's second editing was carried out on a retyped version of Carver's stories, which had incorporated Lish's first editing.

²⁰ In fact, one can perceive the difference between this collection and the next one, *Cathedral*, by simply comparing their last sentences. *Cathedral* closes on a much more affirmative tone, with the following words (from the title story): "It's really something, I said." (228).

²¹ Coincidentally, this passage was published in the *New York Times* during the final revision of this essay, as part of a just-announced project of publishing the restored versions of those stories (see Stull and Carroll 2007).

²² This is particularly true of "A Serious Talk", "Sacks", "I Could See the Smallest Things" and "After the Denim". This same technique was employed in Lish's new ending for "Gazebo", although the published version restored Carver's earlier ending—and that is one of few cases in *What We Talk* in which Carver managed to reverse Lish's changes.

²³ Cfr. Letter to Lish 7/8/1980, *Lish Mss*.

²⁴ Interestingly enough, this essay appeared a few weeks before the publication of *What We Talk* in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, with the title "A Storyteller's Shoptalk".

²⁵ Most stories were in fact written after 1977, and were the result of Carver's recovering from alcoholism.

²⁶ Although some earlier stories had known some extensive editing, one should not forget that several of the stories of *What We Talk* had already been seen and edited by Lish (e.g. "Friendship"), which makes that kind of aggressive editing all the more startling. Incidentally, one may also note Carver's implicit acknowledgement of Lish's "creative" operation when he said to feel "A Small, Good Thing" and "The Bath" as "two different stories" (Gentry and Stull 200).

²⁷ At the same time, it should be noted that some stories were included in their "heavily" edited version in Carver's final collection, *Where I'm Calling From* (e.g. "What We Talk", "Gazebo", "One More Thing" and "Tell the Women We're Going"), which may well be taken as an endorsement of Lish's editorial work.

²⁸ As Bethea colorfully put it: "'A Small, Good Thing' would fit as well in *What We Talk* as a bull in a china shop" (113), although one could argue that if "A Small, Good Thing" had had other earlier versions as its companions, it probably wouldn't have felt so odd and awkward.

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